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SUBJECT: HELMAND: UK REPORT ON WAFA'S JIRGA IN GERESHK

¶1. This report was drafted by the British POLOFF at PRT Lashkah Gar. It is noteworthy in reporting that no Helmand Governor has visited the town of Gereshk in almost 30 years, highlighting the scale of the challenge in securing local support in Helmand. Begin text:

¶2. SUMMARY: Governor Wafa held a Jirga May 10 with local leaders in Gereshk, the first visit there by a Helmand Governor for 28 years. Elders were receptive to the GOA message but skeptical about a new wave of promises. PRT will have to deliver high and early to win them over.

¶3. DETAIL: On 10 May, Wafa held a Jirga in Gereshk, Helmand's commercial centre and second largest town. The event was attended by Commander TFH and Head of the PRT, who led a civilian team comprising the Deputy Head PRT, Stabilisation Adviser, Governance Adviser, and Berger LNO.

¶4. The Jirga took place in a shaded mulberry orchard on the eastern side of the town. The turn out of local leaders was not far short of the 500 invited, although no local religious leaders attended for fear of Taliban retribution. Speeches were given by Wafa, provincial religious leader Mullawi Ahmed, the Mayor, tribal adviser to PTS Ali Shah, chief tribal leader Haji Abdul Qadir, and Commander TFH Brigadier Lorimer, all interspersed with prayers, poetry readings and singing by children. The occasion concluded with lunch and the handing out of turbans. No comments from the floor were invited -- this was disappointing, but probably unsurprising given the circumstances of the last 48 hours in Sarwan Qala.

¶5. Wafa's purpose, as in Sangin on 12 April, was to capitalise on the success of a military operation to project the GOA's authority in an area where central control has been weak for many years. In his speech, Wafa stressed that security would be maintained and would lead to reconstruction and development. He invited Taliban to join the GOA's side, but promised tough action against those who did not. Tribal elders should tell the Taliban to leave their areas and should work with Afghan and international security forces. Development would happen, specifically new schools,

electricity through the Kajaki Dam, and 92 km of roads. On the civilian deaths in Sarwan Qala, Wafa briefly expressed regret and hoped such incidents would not happen again.

¶16. Mullawi Ahmed spoke at length and with passion to disassociate Islam from Taliban jihad. The Mayor welcomed the first Governor's visit for 28 years. Development would create a sense of civic responsibility among local people. Haji Qadir expressed scepticism about GOA's ability to deliver and urged the construction of a new road along the river to Lashkar Gah. Ali Shah was careful not to criticise the Taliban, saying that the issues that made people support the Taliban must be addressed so that people would side with the GOA instead.

¶17. Commander TFH expressed regret about Sarwan Qala, while emphasising the Taliban's disregard for the well-being of civilians. Development was already underway in Gereshk. The Kajaki Dam project would provide huge opportunities; ISAF would only stay in Helmand for as long as was necessary.

PRT COMMENT

¶18. Fears that the event would be completely overshadowed by Sarwan Qala proved unfounded. Our discussions in the margins indicated an understanding among local leaders that it is impossible to avoid civilian casualties entirely when the Taliban fight from amongst the people. Several interlocutors did not even raise the subject with us.

¶19. The fact that the last visit by a Governor to Gereshk apparently happened nearly three decades ago underlines the scale of Wafa's task in securing local support for the GOA.

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We would not disagree with local journalists' estimates that 20 percent of those present were for the GOA, 60 percent were sitting on the fence, and 20 percent were against, with many skeptical about the GOA's ability to deliver. Since even young, well-educated participants were unsure about GoA/international community objectives in Afghanistan, the understanding of the uneducated majority must be lower still.

¶110. This was a fairly festive and colourful event, reflected by the Koran reading chosen deliberately to set the context of a victory celebration. But even so, security (provided by Afghan and ISAF troops) had to be exceptionally tight and many of the participants were nervous. The sound of a couple of Taliban mortar rounds 5-6 miles distant, as if just to remind the Jirga that they are not far away, further underlined the scale of Wafa's challenge. It also underlined the scale, and importance, of our challenge to push GOA (and ourselves) to deliver on the promises made. The HEG/PRT is planning a visit to Gereshk 17th, for a more in depth engagement with local leaders to mobilise effort on reconstruction and development. Same civilian participants from the PRT. End text.

WOOD